**Paul Sharples - Chairman Swilland & Witnesham Grouped Parish Council**

**A year on from Flood, Fire and Frustration – still frustration.**

Unfortunately, there remains much frustration with the continuing failure of SCC to repair and maintain our roads and footpaths, and East Suffolk District Council planners seeming determination to change our villages against our wishes.

The issues following on from the flooding continue to a certain extent, the drainage system remains unfit for purpose – we persevere, and we have not suffered the same deluge that we experienced some 18months ago – fortunately. We received a Section 19 report from SCC which recommends some actions but not full solutions.

After a successful insurance claim after – our book exchange caught fire – allowed us to install a replacement book exchange up at the Swilland end of Witnesham, we have refurbished the one next to the telephone exchange and both are regularly used. Thanks in particular to Matt Johnson for carrying out the refurbishment of the phone box by Church Lane and building the bookshelves in both.

**Membership**

At last year’s meeting Richard Nicol stepped down as chair of the Parish Council and I would like to thank him for all his contributions whilst being chair and for continuing as a Parish Councillor giving continuity in so many areas in which the council operates. I would also like to recognize Simon Barlow for stepping up as Chair for the first part of the year and then Jerry Hindle, Chair of Planning who chaired a number of our meetings whilst we were without a formal Chair, until I felt that I could step in – and I thank all the councillors for being kind to me and helping me fit into the role.

We were all assisted by our excellent Parish Clerk Steve Barron who stepped down as clerk in the early part of the year but covered until we were able to appoint Alison Burrrows our new Clerk, again without whom we would barely function. My thanks reach out to both for keeping us on the straight and narrow.

**Stop The Quarry**

The PC has been a strong supporter of the campaign that is led by an excellent team from the communities in Witnesham, Westerfield and Tuddenham. Several councillors are involved, and the PC has provided £1k of working capital along with the other local PCs to help meet the initial expenses of the campaign.

After a recent meeting for an update on the Stop The Quarry campaign, it is clear that good progress is being made however the team would still benefit from some more volunteers and support. Further, TRU7 is anticipated to be submitting their planning application around the end of April (although that is not definite) and any objections must be registered within 31days of the application.

PLESAE BE AWARE – even if you have signed up to the campaign, and you wish to submit objections, do NOT think that the campaign will be able to register your comments… an objection by the campaign is just that… a single objection. YOU must register your own comments individually. Please visit [www.stopthequarry.info](http://www.stopthequarry.info) for all the details you will need.

**Finance**

The Council’s core income is from the precept, a part of the Council Tax paid by all householders. Our expenditure day-to-day costs seem to increase year on year which means our reserves are close to the minimum we regard as prudent necessitating another 5% increase in precept - around £2.50 per property

The Council also receives 15% of the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) paid by developers. The Council will receive £105,000 in total from the Witten’s Meadow development being paid over last year and this coming year. There are restrictions on the deployment of CIL. Essentially it is to provide for the local infrastructure. The PC needs to consider how these funds can be best used and welcomes ideas for projects from the community

**Planning**

All planning applications submitted to East Suffolk Council for Swilland and Witnesham are passed to the Parish Council for comment, often at short notice. This is part of the formal consultation process and our views are sent to ESC in a set time-scale to fit their decision process, Unfortunately for major developments ESC has not put much weight on our views and detailed local knowledge in coming to their decisions The Parish Council holds meetings reactively to look at applications and any other related planning matters.

Jerry Hindle chairs planning, bringing many years of experience in local government to this important and busy role.

Witten’s Meadow is now quite well established but there are still a few issues outstanding with paths and fencing on the area of Pubic Open Space

The Street Farm application was opposed by your Parish Council and rejected by the ESC planning committee against the recommendation of officers. An appeal by the applicant against the decision is now being considered

**Highways & Footpaths**

Most of our activities on highways involve liaising with SCC Highways dept, which often proves fruitless. On the rare occasions they can be persuaded to act the task is usually not completed properly.

The recent installation of dropped kerbs near to Giles Way caused the road to be closed for five days whilst Highways carried out the work. Closing the road was apparently necessary to ensure the safety of the workers as ‘traffic would have to mount the pavements in order to pass causing an unnecessary danger to pedestrians’... yet they were permitting busses to get through!! And then installing the raised kerbs to allow easier access to the busses without a closure at all!!

In the event – probably due to our protestations – the road was open until around 09:30 and then from early afternoon and overnight. Hopefully this made more sense to residents and school parents not having to take the diversion route.

We remain active participants in SAVID (PCs working together on Safer Village Driving) being conscientiously represented by Andy Dungey. The portable Speed Indicator Devices now appear regularly, fitted by Andy, to encourage drivers to drive within the 30mph limit on the B1077. Most residents will no doubt be unaware that the sign changes from Green to Red if 30mph is exceeded!

**Allotments**

Whilst there have been some changes in tenancy during the year, the allotments in Coopers Close and Hall Lane are all occupied. Thankfully the water supply is now working after a surprising number of snags, all addressed and solved by our Clerk.

**Playing Field and Recreation Ground**

Over many years the Parish Council have leased the playing field and Car Park near The School from SCC. The current lease expired last December.

Tim Burrows is leading a group of interested parties, e.g. School, WASPS and play-school to scope out plans for a new building and sports facilities that will benefit the whole community for the future. Tim is seeking help with what could become the largest initiative by the Parish Council for generations, made partly possible by the enhanced CIL receipts and their use as a lever for matched grant funding.

Although there is still a bit of the legal process to do, the PC has finally gained freehold tenure over part of the school playing field area from SCC. This area is a major asset for the village, which we only leased previously. The security that ownership provides us with enables us to explore longer term development options as well as opening up avenues of potential funding we couldn't previously access. The Playing Field and Rec group would like to use this opportunity to improve the existing area and create new facilities for use by the community. They will be canvassing local opinion and needs in the near future, but in the meantime the PC welcomes any ideas and suggestions from local residents and clubs/societies.

The almost adjoining so-called Poors Land has been under-utilised for many years, With some visionary thinking by the charity trustees this could also become a more valuable community asset and be incorporated in the future plans for the area.

**Witnesham Village Hall**

There are issues with the village hall that require some attention such as ingress of dampness in one corner and the poor condition of the Car Park. Councillor Kim Shaw and Tracey Hardy are both members of the Village Hall Management group

**Village Recorder**

Whilst not a formal Parish Council role it is right here to recognize the contribution of our Witnesham recorder Erica Burrows. Her ‘In Touch’ reports continue to be informative and entertaining. Sam Salter retired this year from the Swilland Recorder role. I thank Sam for his contribution and am delighted that Gina Wilden has stepped forward to fill the role.

**Communications**

All Parish Council and committee minutes and financial records are available on the Council website http://swillandandwitnesham.onesuffolk.net. All meetings are open to the public. Main council meetings take place in the Village Hall, committees usually meet in the side-room of the Baptist Chapel.

In addition, our Clerk holds an email distribution list of parishioners who have agreed to receive notices, event news etc. and we make use of the Witnesham Community group on Facebook.

A paper archive of past meetings and Parish Council documents going back 50 years at least is kept in the Village Hall

**Thanks**

I am most grateful to for the help and support from our County Councillor Elaine Bryce, and District Councillors Dan Clery and Colin Hedley. Unfortunately, Elaine has been unable to join us for much of the year due to health issues, and I am sure everyone will join myself and our Parish Councillors in wishing her well.

An efficient Parish Clerk is vital in the smooth running of a Parish Council. In Steve Barron we had a professional manager, well versed in the increasing complexity of the legalities surrounding local government and someone with whom it is a pleasure to work. I am very pleased to say that Alison Burrows very quickly demonstrated the same characteristics in keeping us in order.

I conclude by thanking our Parish Councillors. All are volunteers who give up their time to help the community. They bring a vast range of experience, expertise and specialisms to the Council. Their individual contributions are many, various and usually unsung. I am grateful to them all.

There are currently four positions on the council unfilled and if anyone is interested, please talk to me at the end of the meeting or get in touch with our Parish Clerk.

Paul Sharples

Chairman Swilland & Witnesham Grouped Parish Council.

16th April 2025